The Origins of Palestinian Art

Authors: Bashir Makhoul and Gordon Hon.

Professor Bashir Makhoul is Rector of Winchester Campus and Head of School at Winchester School of Art, University of Southampton.

Dr Gordon Hon is Lecturer in Fine Art and Visual Culture at Winchester School of Art, University of Southampton.

Publisher: Liverpool University Press, Nov 2013, 269 pages.

ISBN 978-1-84631-952-5 (hardback) Price £ 75

ISBN 978-1-84631-952-2 (paperback) Price £19.95

Reviewed by Dr. Ronnie Close,
Department of Journalism and Mass Communications,
American University in Cairo, Egypt.

Contemporary art over the last twenty years has seen a rapid rise in English language publications on Arab art. This apparent Western fascination with art produced within this region often pinpoints attention to the Israeli/Palestinian conflict in particular. The contested historical narrative of the Palestinian people has emboldened generations of artists from this cultural context. *The Origins of Palestinian Art* is a noteworthy addition which sets out to inform on the complexity of such identities formed by a nation in flux. This comprehensive and thoughtful publication claims to "explore the intricate relationship between art and nationalism" (back cover). The authors, Bashir Makhoul and Gordon Hon, frame a number of significant issues on identity in the production of art that is overshadowed by the undertaking of Palestinian nationhood.

The books begins by surveying the existing arguments on the subject, in particular through appraisal of two polarised publications, *Palestinian Art* by Israeli art critic Gannit Ankori and *Palestinian Art 1850-2005* by Palestinian art historian Kamal Boullata. References to these texts reoccur throughout Makhoul and Hon's publication and the dispute centers on claims of discovery of the subject of Palestinian art. Makhoul and Hon take care to define the distinctiveness of their research and view the question originality as irrelevant.

In *The Origins of Palestinian Art* the historical narrative provides fresh insight on the origins of art production and the cultural characteristics inferred in the art works discussed, for instance the prevalence of text in Palestinian visual art.

The book is divided into six thematic rather than chronological chapters with the opening one titled *The Problem of the Beginning.* Here the authors go to great lengths to orientate the reader through an ambitious but coherent navigation of Post-Colonial theory with a reliance on the somewhat predictable coordinates of Edward Said, Michel Foucault, Walter Benjamin and Homi Baba. Building on concepts set out in the introduction the authors weave Palestinian art into a web of meaning to pursue some difficult truths. For example, the power relations at play in the contested space of Palestine, both in the real and imagined realms, are often successfully mediated through art. Despite the impossibility of defining the authenticity of nationalism, Palestinian art has expressed an aspiration for sovereignty that often exposes paradoxical positions. A contemporary example of this would be artist Khaled Hourani's *Picasso in Palestine*, that deployed Picasso's painting *Buste de Femme* (1943) for display in the International Academy of Art in Ramallah (2011). The exhibition consisted of Picasso's original painting hung on a white cube wall albeit under the armed guard of two Palestinian Authority policemen. In the book there is an examination of this conceptual art work to reveal a process of negotiation over two years. Within this project lies a potential for failure at the core as the artist was prepared to paint a copy for display if permission was refused by the Van Abbemuseum in Holland to exhibit the original. Such projects draw comparison to the precarious existence of Palestine itself and the exhibition cannot be divorced from the validation of the Palestinian state. If *Picasso in Palestine* reminds us of the fraughtness of becoming a nation like Palestine, as the authors point out, the real failure remains with the Israeli state's preoccupation with security and dependency on vast wall system that is an admission of isolation.

The following excellent chapter, *Origin and Disaster,* addresses the violent establishment of Israel in 1948 or the *Nakba* (disaster in Arabic). The national rupture for the Palestinians is on-going in both a temporal and spatial sense. In the chapter's narrative, the deconstruction begins with a story of radio interview with a captured Palestinian on the Voice of Israel station during the First Intifada (1987). Conducted in local colloquial Arabic the "Terrorist" refutes this label in a teasing parody of the Israeli's Arabic, unbeknownst to the interviewer or the wider Israeli listenership.

The role of voice and subversion for post-1948 Palestinains is well established through much of the literature of the time and later developed into the motif of the mouth in contemporary art practices. From Mona Hatoum's 1990s video art that innovatively deployed optical cameras throughout her body, to a later generation of video performance artists exploring the ability to speak back to power as a central artistic concern.

Also in the chapter the discourse details the use of the camera and photographic processes to direct creativity as the authors put forward a number of art works using light a metaphor for oppression or containment.

From these two lengthy chapters the book shifts into three loosely spatial divisions, *Jerusalem as the Navel and the Blind Spot*; *Inside the Line: Palestinians in Israel* and *Al-Shataat: A Coherence of Dispersion.* In essence these discourses develop around the influences on artists either side of an existence within or outside of the unstable Palestinian state. Waves of emigration and refugee catastrophes have blended with a globalized art market to further fragment and complicate the concept of Palestinian identity and art. The book demarcates the political landscape in the aftermath of the Oslo 1 Accord (1993) signed by the PLO and Israel. This paved the way for the PLO's Fatah to gain control a new state that in turn created a Hamas governed Gaza Strip. Artists remaining within these political constructs struggled with reactionary agendas. This apparent political breakthrough diverged art from the political ambition of an autonomous Palestinian nation as the art practice shifted towards the personal and a post-nationalist debate. The three chapters also outline the manner of Israeli influence on the local Palestinian cultural sphere through the establishment of Israeli museums, universities and the opportunities afforded to Palestinian artists living within Israeli territory.

Beyond this we learn how the Palestinian diaspora play a significant role in contributing to what defines Palestinian art both internally and on the global art stage. Their influence extends to, as the authors suggest, a type of identity capital that exploits and is exploited by cultural commodification. However, the authors emphasize the supportive role this dichotomy can also play with the foundation of Palestinian art schools, biennials and other creative projects that instill a sense of cultural empowerment in the country. The overall impression created suggests a transferal from the overt nationalism of the post-1948 artists to the aesthetic transformation of contemporary conceptualism within a fluid globalized context.

The authors are justifiably enthusiastic to extol the international profile and global impact of Palestinian art enjoys that overshadows beleaguered political project of the Palestinian nation state. This contrasts to the rather insular cultural inflection of the Zionist influenced Israeli state that remains critically isolated from the global art stage. The book makes a persuasive argument on these tragically interlinked but conflicted states as Palestinian art enjoys a cultural authority at the expense of Israel.

The publication is a timely tribute to the determined generations of Palestinian artists who have produced discursive and fluid art that amplifies their historical narrative beyond the shifting national boundaries. *The Origins of Palestinian Art* is an excellent edition that provides a cultural context for Palestinian art and impacts favorably on earlier publications in the field.

References

Ankori, Gannit. 2006. *Palestinian Art*, London: Reaktion Books.

Boullata, Kamal. 2009, *Palestinian Art: 1850-2005,* London: Saqi Books.